

Gwendolyn Brooks: Impacting Illinois One Reader at a Time

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Not many people can say that they have influenced Illinois history, but through her poetry Gwendolyn Brooks can. Writing style and inspirations from the past made a good poet a great one. Also, quality writing depends on the characters, and how they can relate to the reader. For example, many citizens have been affected by Gwendolyn Brooks' poetry. These include the students in Illinois, which Brooks helped by having contests and classes. Therefore, because of Gwendolyn Brooks' understanding of life in Chicago, her poetry influenced Illinois by inspiring readers to understand the difficulties and struggles of African American life during the 1990s.

Gwendolyn Brooks' childhood inspirations led to her writing about the hardships of an African American, which made her readers understand the life of Chicago. Her parents' support during her childhood greatly influenced her writing. During school, teachers would often charge her with plagiarism because of how well she wrote. Brooks wrote poems about trees, friendships, flowers, and enemy ships that she saw. Gwendolyn started off with early publications in her writing career. At age eleven, she had her first poem published in the neighborhood paper, the Hyde Parker. At thirteen, American Childhood published her first poem in a magazine. These early publications helped her get on track for her writing in the future. Brooks' high school years impacted her writing as well. She went to three high schools, which included Hyde Park High School, an all-white school, Wendel Phillips High School, an all-African American school, and Englewood High School, an integrated school. Those high schools and Wilson Junior

College, from which she graduated, in 1963, gave her ideas on the racial situations in Chicago, which influenced her work. Because of her childhood inspirations, Brooks' readers understood the way of life in Chicago.

Brooks' writing style is important because it enabled readers to better understand the hardships of life in Chicago as an African American. Brooks' writing style reflected her care for every poem she wrote and really wanted the reader to understand life in Chicago. She wrote about life as a lower-class African American, and her poems were about people's lives that the readers could understand. Her poems in the 1940s were about an area in Chicago called Bronzeville. In 1945, the poems were published in a book called A Street in Bronzeville. The book describes vivid pictures of Chicago because of Brooks' tones of standard English, American verse, black Protestant preachers, and street talk. Her tones greatly helped the reader understand some of the Chicago ways. Another reason Brooks' writing affected Illinois is because her poems connect to the reader. Unlike some other urban writers, she did not hold the city liable for what happens to people, but that it is an existing force with which the citizens have to cope. In good writing, the readers should be able to relate to the characters. This happens often in Gwendolyn Brooks' poetry. For example, her characters often try to survive from day to day and are memorable because of that, instead of showing any heroism. One of Gwendolyn's poems, called "To the Diaspora," is written to African Americans who did not consider themselves outstanding. This poem, like many others by Brooks tries to encourage African Americans to be more confident in themselves. Brooks' writing style reflected her views of life in Chicago, and how difficult it was during the 1900s.

Brooks also taught poetry at a college level to try and change the way of life for young people by teaching them to express themselves. Her first teaching job was at a poetry workshop at Columbia College in Chicago in 1963. There, Brooks conducted seminars, read her poetry, and held poetry workshops and lectures. She taught quite a bit of creative writing and told her students that they should find their own writing style. Brooks also taught that a writer should know everything about their topic; including general information, what is going on at the time they were writing, and what went on in the past. In 1967, Brooks attended a Black Writers Conference at Fisk University, which changed the way she wrote her poetry. The conference made her write new poetry called “black poetry,” or according to Brooks, poetry written by African Americans, about African Americans, to African Americans. Brooks found that, with this new address of poetry, being a good poet was not enough, and that she wanted to do more for the younger people in the community. By teaching people at a college level about poetry and expressing themselves, Gwendolyn Brooks make a difference in her community.

Gwendolyn Brooks was named poet laureate of Illinois in 1969, allowing her to influence the children of the Chicago area. Wanting to do something for the children in the community, she made up her own poetry contest for children in the elementary through high school age in Illinois. Each year, Brooks sponsored the contests by giving five hundred dollars to the winner. These contests gave children an opportunity to learn about poetry that they would not have had otherwise. Her contests and classes have been an attempt to help them see the poetry in their lives in the inner city. Gwendolyn did a poetry workshop for a teenage gang in Chicago called the Blackstone Rangers. She wrote a poem about them called “The Blackstone Rangers,” which described their

lifestyle. In the poem, she compared members of the gang to famous leaders, such as Martin Luther King, Jr. During her time teaching them, the Blackstone Rangers were shown how to write poetry and get out their feelings. Becoming poet laureate helped Gwendolyn Brooks be able to motivate children in the Chicago community to write poetry.

Because of Gwendolyn Brooks' understanding of life in Chicago, her poetry influenced Illinois by inspiring readers to understand the difficulties and struggles of African American life during the 1990s. Brooks is the first and only American writer chosen to receive the Society for Literature Award by the University of Thessaloniki in Athens, Greece. Because of this, Gwendolyn Brooks thought that a good poet not only writes well, but also gives back to the community through their writing. Also, she believed that writers should know everything about their topic, including the past, present and general information. Moreover, she also thought that poets should get out their feelings and express themselves in their poetry. Undoubtedly, Gwendolyn Brooks has influenced Illinois with poetry throughout her life. [From James C. Hall, "A Way with Words." Footsteps, Mar.-Apr. 2005; George E. Kent, A Life of Gwendolyn Brooks; Joan Kufrin, "Our Miss Brooks." Chicago Tribune Magazine Mar. 28, 1982; Michael R. Strickland, African American Poets; Kenny Jackson Williams, Brooks' Life and Career http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/a_f/brooks/life.htm (Sept. 6, 2005).]